Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

Am J Orthopsychiatry. Author manuscript; available in PMC 2023 January 23.

Published in final edited form as:

Am J Orthopsychiatry. 2021 ; 91(4): 558–568. doi:10.1037/ort0000556.

Production and Maintenance of the Institutional In/Visibility of Sexual and Gender Minority Students in Schools

Alena Kuhlemeier[1,2], **Jessica R. Goodkind**[1], **Cathleen E. Willging**[2,3]

[1]Department of Sociology, University of New Mexico

[2]Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation—Southwest Center

[3]Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico

Abstract

This research investigates how school professionals, as institutional actors, influence school climates experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Although research links institutional characteristics to outcomes for LGBTQ youth, scholars do not yet fully understand the mechanisms. We address this gap through a mesolevel analysis of staff perspectives on schools' responsibilities to LGBTQ students. Using data from 96 semistructured interviews with high school staff during the 2016–2017 school year, we found that participants used three main cues to assess visibility of the school's LGBTQ population: (a) student self-advocacy; (b) students' enactment of LGBTQ stereotypes; and (c) same-sex relationships. Reliance on these cues led staff to underestimate the LGBTQ population and employ narrative frames to rationalize the status quo: small LGBTQ population did not merit allocating resources; all students were treated equally; LGBTQ-inclusive policies further marginalized LGBTQ students; and student issues were addressed through individualized interventions. Our research shows how staff's biases collide with institutional inertia to influence school climate, one crucial facet of the ecological contexts of LGBTQ youth. We conclude with discussion of implications and recommendations.

As institutions in which youth spend large portions of their lives, schools can help build resilience and/or cause harm, depending on the schools' cultivation of safe and supportive environments. Attending schools with hostile environments can negatively affect all students, but lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth are more likely to report experiencing such environments compared to cisgender and heterosexual students (Kann et al., 2016). In this context, a "hostile school environment" is often operationalized as characterized by the presence of anti-LGBTQ remarks, verbal or physical harassment, and discrimination in school (Kosciw et al., 2009). Findings from the 2019 National School Climate Survey, administered by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that of 23,001 LGBTQ student respondents, 59.1% reported feeling unsafe at school, 98.8% heard "gay" used negatively at school, 68.7% were verbally harassed, 25.7% were physically harassed, 58.3% were sexually harassed, and 59.1% were subject to policies discriminatory toward LGBTQ students in the past year at school (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Hostile school environments can affect the mental health and academic success of LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013, 2018; Ueno, 2005). Schools with LGBTQ-affirming environments can contribute to positive academic outcomes and reduced suicidal thoughts and behaviors for LGBTQ youth (Heck et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2018; Poteat et al., 2013). Much quantitative research has investigated these associations, elucidating how ecological contexts influence individual-level outcomes (Mustanski et al., 2011; Poteat et al., 2013), and how school-level factors moderate effects on LGBTQ behavioral health. Compared to peers attending schools without Genders and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs), LGBTQ students in schools with GSAs were less likely to hear homophobic remarks, feel unsafe, and experience victimization, and reported more supportive staff and peers (Kosciw et al., 2020). Less research has qualitatively explored institutional precursors contributing to hostile or LGBTQ-friendly school contexts.

Schools' institutional cultures are shaped by the individuals comprising them. To understand the landscapes with which LGBTQ youth contend, we must examine the perspectives of those adults who participate in creating institutional cultures. Analyzing qualitative data from interviews with 96 administrators, teachers, school nurses, counselors, and social workers, we examine how school professionals understand LGBTQ student needs and the responsibility of schools to meet them. Through this analysis, we illuminate implicit and explicit biases held by staff to understand their influence on institutional cultures and identify ways to advance LGBTQ-supportive cultures in schools.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Student Needs

Despite improvements, national trends concerning institutional supports for LGBTQ youth demonstrate an overall dearth in their availability. For example, only 13% of youth surveyed in 2017 indicated that their school had an antibullying/harassment policy that addressed bullying on the basis of sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018). Further, although school professionals often report desires to serve as allies for LGBTQ students, they lack awareness of the issues facing LGBTQ students at school and training to address them (Bradley et al., 2019). Consequently, their efforts often do not provide meaningful, institution-wide support for LGBTQ students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).

Quantitative findings are substantiated by in-depth, qualitative interviews with LGBTQ youth. In one 2016 study, LGBTQ youth identified four main categories of needs: social connectedness to combat isolation; acceptance and visibility; emotional support and safety; and LGBTQ identity supports (Paceley, 2016). In an earlier study, LGBTQ youth described similar needs and called for efforts to educate communities about LGBTQ people, inclusive schools, LGBTQ-specific resources, and family acceptance (Davis et al., 2010). Community supports, such as inclusive school policies and LGBTQ visibility, are important macrolevel needs that cannot be ignored (Paceley, 2016). Nor should support and acceptance vital to LGBTQ youth well-being be limited to individual-level interventions.

A third qualitative study investigated how sexual minority male and transgender female adolescents maintained their well-being amid cissexism and heterosexism. Participants

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

derived resilience from advocating for themselves against stigmatization from families, communities, and peers (Bry et al., 2018). When asked about advice they would give to other LGBTQ youth, they emphasized the importance of seeking support from LGBTQ peers and community members, families, and adults at school (Bry et al., 2018). This study further underscored that schools' inclusive institutional climate, prioritization of LGBTQ visibility, and acceptance by staff were critical to supporting LGBTQ youth in schools.

It is vital to note that LGBTQ students are not monolithic, and do not experience school climates in the same way. According to the 2019 GLSEN National School Climate Survey, lesbian/gay and pansexual-identified students reported higher levels of victimization based on their sexual orientation while queer and pansexual students reported the highest levels of victimization based on their gender expression. Transgender and nonbinary students reported more experiences of victimization and feeling unsafe at school, compared to cisgender LGBQ students (Kosciw et al., 2020). LGBTQ youths' experiences at school are shaped not only by sexual orientation and gender expression, but also by their race/ethnicity. Indigenous LGBTQ students were more likely than all other racial/ethnic groups to report LGBTQ-based victimization and discrimination at school. Latinx LGBTQ students were more likely than white and multiracial students to feel unsafe or experience bullying because of their race/ethnicity. Latinx students also reported more experiences of anti-LGBTQ discrimination at school compared to all racial/ethnic groups, except Indigenous LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Efforts to promote LGBTQ-affirming school climates must be cognizant of these intersectional differences within larger LGBTQ student populations. These differences are often homogenized in cultural discourses and activist organizing in ways that shape popular conceptions of LGBTQ youth as monolithic (Ciszek, 2017). School staff's impressions of LGBTQ students, especially those staff who do not identify as LGBTQ themselves, are likely to be heavily influenced by these popular conceptions.

Preparing School Staff to Address Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Student Needs

Adequate training contributes to the capacity of teachers and other staff to translate positive intentions toward serving LGBTQ students into beneficial outcomes (Kimmel, 2016; Pennell, 2017). Recent studies have found that while their attitudes about supporting LGBTQ students are overwhelmingly positive, staff are rarely exposed to material about LGBTQ student needs in their teacher preparation programs, continuing education, and professional development (Kull et al., 2019; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). A national study of 1,741 school social workers, counselors, and psychologists found that 70% had not received training for working with sexual minority populations and 81% had not received training related to transgender populations (Kull et al., 2019). This study found that only 48% of 98 teachers surveyed had received any antibullying training (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016).

School professionals may be hard-pressed to fill these knowledge gaps when resource-poor districts lack professional development funds (Brownell et al., 2018). Districts' failure

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

to allocate funds for professional development related to LGBTQ student needs can detrimentally affect efforts to foster supportive school environments. It is vital for schools to institute evidence-based strategies to meet these needs, such as those outlined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Professional development can facilitate the implementation of such strategies, enabling staff to act as crucial intermediaries between school-level policies and student outcomes. Yet, without specific training on LGBTQ issues and the needs of LGBTQ students, staff may adopt "common-sense" ideologies about the sameness of students in service of interpreting the needs of a diverse student body (DeTurk, 2018; Mathison, 1998). Treating students equally is not the same as treating students equitably (Banks, 1995; DeTurk, 2018; Nieto, 2000). Equality implies sameness while equity connotes justice, such that individual students' circumstances are accounted for in the allocation of resources. To promote healthier environments for all youth, schools and their staff must prioritize equitable treatment of youth, including LGBTQ students (Andrews et al., 2017; Powers & Duffy, 2016; Rands, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Critical pedagogy scholars point to the reproduction of hegemonic discourses in schools through implicit centering of white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender experiences, and marginalizing students not fitting this norm (DeTurk, 2018). When tacit marginalization of certain students occurs in schools pursuant to staff's ideological commitment to the equality of all students, school environments are less explicitly affirming of diverse students. Engagement with this strategy of "blindness" to students' differences "grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity" (Taylor, 1994; 39), but can neglect the influences of their diverse social locations (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Taylor, 1994), thus reinforcing hetero- and cis-normative structures that allow anti-LGBTQ remarks, bullying, microaggressions, and discrimination to shape school climates.

Staff perspectives on the treatment and experiences of LGBTQ students in schools represent a significant gap in research. To understand how staff see their role in developing supportive school environments, it is necessary to adopt a mesolevel analysis of the interactions between institutional structures and their actors (Gkiouleka et al., 2018; Richter & Dragano, 2018). Saperstein et al. (2013) describe the mesolevel as the territory where ideological projects (e.g., adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive policies or difference blindness) contend with bureaucratic structures and institutional inertia.

Micro-, meso-, and macrolevel factors determine academic and behavioral health outcomes of LGBTQ youth. These levels are defined by interactions between LGBTQ students, their peers and teachers, school climate and norms, and formal school policies, respectively. Each level interacts with and determines the contours of the others (Gkiouleka et al., 2018; Richter & Dragano, 2018). Research has focused heavily on microlevel (e.g., individual experiences of victimization) and macrolevel (e.g., district or state policies) determinants of LGBTQ behavioral health and academic success. Less attention has been paid to the mesolevel (e.g., institutional) forces and actors that mediate these levels. Jephcote and Davies (2004) conceive of mesolevel actors as "mediators in the process of policy-making

Author Manuscript

and implementation" (549) who recontextualize discourse. Mesolevel actors, such as school staff and administrators, recontextualize school policies, curricula, and procedures in the context of their own attitudes and biases.

Mesolevel analysis of how staff navigates institutional structures and their own ideologies can deepen our understanding of how their behaviors and actions affect the social ecologies of schools. Such analysis also illuminates the interplay of micro-, meso-, and macro-level aspects of these ecologies and the impact on LGBTQ student well-being. As such, the following research questions guided our analysis:

1. How do school professionals perceive LGBTQ students' needs at their schools?
2. What strategies do school professionals use for meeting LGBTQ student needs?

We extend current scholarship on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth using qualitative data from mesolevel actors to illuminate how individuals within schools may engender institutional conditions that inform LGBTQ youth outcomes. We conclude by proposing a framework for understanding how school staff can work to meet their ideals of equality and equity for all of their students.

Data and Method

Participants

The sample for our study included 96 school professionals in 41 high schools (grades 9 through 12) across the majority-minority state of New Mexico. These individuals were recruited for interviews as part of their school's participation in a 5-year cluster-randomized controlled trial (RCT). The RCT aimed to reduce suicide among sexual and gender minority youth through the use of implementation science methods encouraging adoption and uptake of CDC-recommended strategies (hereafter, Reducing LGBTQ Adolescent Suicide [RLAS]).

Specifically, these strategies encourage schools to implement the following six policies and practices to promote the health and safety of LGBTQ youth: (a) Prohibit bullying, harassment, and violence against all students; (b) Identify "safe spaces" for LGBTQ youth where they can access supportive school staff; (c) Promote the development and sponsorship of student-led clubs and organizations that encourage safe and accepting school environments for LGBTQ youth (e.g., GSAs); (d) Include STD and pregnancy prevention information in health curricula that is relevant to LGBTQ youth; (e) Train school staff on the creation of safe and supportive school environments for LGBTQ youth; and (f) Provide resources to students that facilitate their access to community-based health providers with experience providing care to LGBTQ youth (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2017). Each recommendation capitalizes on existing infrastructures in high schools. For instance, high schools generally have processes in place for founding and sponsoring student-led clubs, student handbooks that set standards for student behavior, and requirements for staff's professional development. The CDC-recommended strategies call upon schools to leverage these key infrastructures in specific ways to promote a more welcoming and accepting environment for LGBTQ youth.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

As we describe elsewhere (Green et al., 2018; Shattuck et al., 2020), schools were eligible if they were public institutions, biannually implemented the New Mexico version (New Mexico Risk and Resiliency Survey [NM-YRRS]) of the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) survey, and had a high-ranking administrator and a school professional willing to support the implementation of the CDC-recommended strategies. The original RLAS study team worked with state health and education agencies to contact relevant personnel to determine eligibility and recruit schools.

The interview guide used in this study was developed by the third author (Willging) and colleagues at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE). Interviews were conducted by the PIRE research team with each school's administrator and professional in the 2016–2017 school year as part of baseline data collection for the RCT. The final sample for this analysis consisted of at least one administrator ($N = 41$; e.g., principal, vice principal) and one health professional ($N = 55$; e.g., school nurse, social worker, counselor) from each school. On average, participants were 47 years old and had worked at their schools for 7 years. Approximately 67% were female, and one participant identified as gender nonconforming. Participants were asked to report their race separately from Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity. They described their races as white (81%), Native American (9%), Black (3%), and "other race" (7%), and 44% identified their ethnicity as Hispanic. As such, many participants who identified as Hispanic, also identified their race as white. They worked in schools that were rural (36.8%), urban (31.6%), or in "urban clusters," consisting of towns with more than 2,500 and fewer than 50,000 residents (31.6%).

Data Collection.—Our semistructured interviews were conducted in the course of the original RCT and examined "readiness" to implement the CDC-recommended strategies. Interviews averaged 45–60 min in length. Open-ended questions inquired into attitudes toward LGBTQ youth in the community and at school, understanding of LGBTQ student needs, and the school's efforts to address them. Participants were further asked to respond to questions regarding differences among LGBTQ students and their needs on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. The interview protocol was flexible enough to allow participants to guide the conversation's flow and pursue topics not already considered. It was structured enough to ensure that participants were asked the same questions (Patton, 2015). All interviews were conducted at participants' places of employment (e.g., schools), audio-recorded, and professionally transcribed. All research and informed consent procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the PIRE.

Positionality and Data Analysis

The analytic team included three white, LGBTQ-identified women: a sociologist (Kuhlemeier) who coded and analyzed the interviews and drafted findings, a community psychologist who refined the analysis and writing (Goodkind), and a cultural anthropologist who conducted readiness interviews, engaged in member checking and data interpretation, and edited the manuscript (Willging). Few researchers have relied on the perspectives of school staff to understand how school environments develop that are hostile to LGBTQ youth. We applied a grounded theory methodology to develop our analytic strategy (Charmaz, 2006). As a result, our study required us to derive our theoretical framework

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

from the data themselves. Our use of a grounded theory methodology allowed results to emerge from the data without being forced to conform to existing theoretical frameworks. Grounded theory was designed to accomplish all of these tasks through its systematic and flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

In cases where a bottom-up framework for analysis of a social process is necessary to build theory, Charmaz (2006) recommends an iterative process of data collection and analysis wherein analysis shapes data collection and vice versa. Since we relied on data that had already been collected as part of an RCT, we were not able to engage in this iterative manner of data collection and analysis. To account for these limitations in our analysis, we incorporated iteration in our analysis process where possible (e.g., consulting original interviewers regarding our analytic framework; MacKay et al., 2017).

Using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12, we coded interview transcripts through open and focused coding techniques. We used open coding to inductively identify broad and emergent themes. We then chose key descriptive codes that fit the data (e.g., "visibility," "same") and drafted detailed memos to explore and analyze relationships between codes. These memos contributed to the development of more focused, analytical codes (e.g., "singling out as stigma," "equality through sameness"). We then rereviewed the interviews and applied analytical codes, followed by revision and polishing of the analytic memos. To structure findings, we interwove pieces of the memos in ways that logically cohered and reflected the larger overarching themes derived from the data.

Findings

We found that staff, on the whole, were committed to the need for safe schools for all students. However, the ways in which they translated this commitment into potential concrete, institutional actions for promoting a safe and welcoming school environment for LGBTQ students often undermined these aspirations. We also identified a trend of "difference blindness" (Smith & Shin, 2014), wherein staff employed multiple narrative strategies, sometimes simultaneously, to unintentionally but effectively marginalize LGBTQ students.

In/Visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Students

Most participants expressed explicit or implicit assumptions about the number of LGBTQ students at their schools. These estimations frequently relied on participants' anecdotal experiences and rarely on empirical population estimates. Schools had access to such estimates based on student self-report, per their completion of the NM-YRRS. Since 2013, the NM-YRRS has asked students about their sexual orientation. Most participants had not accessed this information, despite its availability.

Some participants lamented the lack of data. When asked about LGBTQ student needs, one participant responded,

> I feel like we have some things in place, but are we meeting the needs or not? I don't know. I haven't surveyed that specific group, and we have a really small LGBTQ community here. It's like, how would you get that information and gather

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

> that data? I really don't have any data on that. (cis-female, white, heterosexual, school-health professional [#0112])

Due to the perceived lack of data, participants commonly expressed the belief that there were not LGBTQ students in their school. One school-health professional explained,

> I just don't see that occurring. It's not obvious. It hasn't been brought to my attention. When I started, the kids that were pointed out to me were developmentally delayed or having health issues, but no one has brought anyone to my attention that they're having some kind of sexual identity crisis or deviant behavior that might cause them to have more attention. That was not brought to my attention and I don't see anybody that seems to be struggling with that here. (cis-female, heterosexual, Hispanic [#0109])

A second school-health professional explained, "I don't know of any that have identified as [LGBTQ]" (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0107]). Overall, participants expressed certainty that they would be aware of LGBTQ students, yet because no one had told them about such students, there were not any. If they acknowledged the presence of LGBTQ students, they relied on the following cues: a) students advocated for their civil rights as LGBTQ people; b) students' self-expressions fit stereotypes of the LGBTQ community; and (c) awareness of student displaying affection to other students of the same sex.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Self-Advocacy.— Participants who gauged the relative size of the school's LGBTQ population on seeing students advocate for their civil rights were often those responsible for addressing students' requests. In some instances, participants could identify a number of transgender students but had difficulty recalling any lesbian, gay, or bisexual students. One school-health professional remarked,

> I really don't know. We do have a couple kids here who I believe are transgendered [sic]. I mean certainly there's got to be kids here who are gay and lesbian but I don't know. (cis-female, bisexual, white [#0103])

At minimum, self-advocacy by transgender students reportedly included requests to use their chosen name and pronouns rather than those inscribed in their school records, and for restroom access. Notably, when these interviews were conducted, this type of advocacy was just beginning to gain national prominence. A counselor focused on a single transgender student:

> This student wants to be called a girl and is showing up and I don't think their parents know. That was the first time that I think our staff was :: : faced with, "Where is that student going to go to the restroom?" That kind of stirred up a lot of 'How are our students going to feel?' ::: It was just a lot of fear. So, to resolve that the student was allowed to go to the employees' restroom instead of using male or female student restrooms but then that stirred up a lot of discomfort with the staff. (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0235])

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

When asked about LGBTQ students generally, staff often invoked anecdotes of having to make accommodations for transgender students or noticing the efforts of such students to dress in accordance with their gender identities.

Another school-health professional starkly summed up sentiments regarding LGBTQ students' self-advocacy, "They know that it's an unaccepting community and kids are going to do one of two things, they're either in your face about it or they don't say anything. We need to help them find a middle ground and a voice" (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0108]). To the extent that sexual minority students did not as frequently advocate for these types of civil rights, the participants who assessed LGBTQ population size through observations of student self-advocacy did not discuss them as regularly.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Stereotypes.— Participants often characterized sexual minority students as too "flamboyant," "loud," or "arrogant." Many expressed negativity about blatant displays of students' sexuality or reported witnessing fellow staff express those feelings. For instance, one lesbian-identified school-health professional explained,

> Occasionally there'll be a student who triggers people, and I think it has a little bit to do with :: : I hear the word arrogance occasionally. You'll get a really strong, gay young man who's very flamboyant and really intelligent, and that can trigger a few people to think they're a little full of themselves, and then you'll hear some of the little less than kind :: : "Why do they have to be quite so arrogant?"(cis-female, white [#0129])

Similarly, an administrator observed,

> From obvious common sense, you can see that it's somewhat looked strangely upon. I think the one part that makes it look very strange is the flamboyancy. When those that come out are flamboyant about it, it brings a lot of attention and lots of the time it's negative. (cis-male, heterosexual, American Indian [#0210])

These individuals both expressed negative attitudes about self-presentation among LGBTQ students, invoking the word "flamboyant" to describe them as attention-seeking and arrogant. The two quotes above also reflected attitudes about gay males, but stereotypes about lesbians also influenced assessments of the LGBTQ student population. A school-health professional discussed the school's dress code policies in relation to two students:

> It is our school policy that that is appropriate attire and they don't go at it from a sexuality standpoint, which is how they get by with it :: : A lot of it is fear for what will happen to those children but these were two very out, very loud, very noticeably lesbian girls. They weren't kidding anybody, okay? If they showed up in a dress that would be the surprise. (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0108])

The above participants were supportive of LGBTQ students in their interviews. However, evident in the preceding remarks was a sense of irritation with how "out" and "loud" they perceived students to be. Such attitudes may contribute to stigmatization of LGBTQ youth, and, through reliance on stereotypes, produce a narrow sense of the LGBTQ student population.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Relationships.— Participants estimated the size of the school's LGBTQ population based on observations of same-sex couples in the hallways. In many cases, they characterized these relationships in the context of having to curb public displays of affection (PDA), although they were quick to clarify that they did not tolerate PDA among any students. However, using visible relationships to estimate the number of LGBTQ students led participants to conceptualize the LGBTQ population as relatively small and largely consisting of bisexual girls. Like other participants, an administrator predicated his assessment of LGBTQ visibility on observations of relationships between female students: "Being bisexual is kind of the cool thing, especially with, not with males but with females. We'll see girls have relationships with girls and then a week later with a boy :: : That's more accepted socially outside of the school as well" (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0230]).

Participants expressed discomfort with how LGBTQ students asserted their identities, whether through self-advocacy, self-expression, or relationships, when they perceived such displays to be overt. Despite their expressed support for LGBTQ youth, they seemed to implicitly caution that LGBTQ visibility was still expected to conform to what staff considered "appropriate." Self-expression that suggested a student was LGBTQ or did not conform to norms was often interpreted as inappropriate. As a result, LGBTQ youth were potentially compelled to navigate LGBTQ stigma and identity dynamics in ways that forced them to remain invisible or allowed them to be contingently visible, often at the expense of their relationships with staff.

In/Visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Student Needs.—Participants who characterized their school as having a small or homogenous LGBTQ student population had a similarly restricted sense of its needs. However, while some recognized that LGBTQ students had needs that were distinct from other students, they clarified that staff were often stretched thin because of their workload and lack of access to resources, such as professional development or in-service training opportunities.

This latter group suggested that efforts to address LGBTQ student needs would have neutral outcomes at best, and could even be harmful. These participants engaged in nonmutually exclusive narrative strategies to rationalize inaction and unconsciously avoid responsibility for taking future steps toward inclusivity. These strategies included asserting: (a) that LGBTQ-specific policies or training requirements were unnecessary, given the small population of LGBTQ students; (b) the importance of treating all students the same; (c) that singling out LGBTQ youth by promoting LGBTQ-inclusive policies was stigmatizing; and (d) the school was already doing everything possible to address LGBTQ student needs through case-by-case intervention.

It is important to note that participants frequently used more than one of these strategies, sometimes simultaneously, over the course of their interviews. We argue that the use of these strategies reflected an underlying, unconscious desire on the part of participants to believe that they were fulfilling their responsibility to LGBTQ students. Often, differences in participants' use of strategies did not necessarily reflect a qualitatively different

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

understanding of schools' institutional responsibilities. Instead, the use of varied strategies only reflected a slightly different rhetorical approach to making the case that they were meeting the needs of LGBTQ students.

Never Had Any Issues.—The first strategy involved arguing that implementing LGBTQ-inclusive policies was irrelevant because there were few such students and/or that they had not heard of any bullying warranting special intervention. Speaking to a school's responsibility to meet LGBTQ student needs, one school-health professional explained,

> We don't have a large population ::: If we have a really large population, maybe five, six, or seven students and there's a need, then I will seek out somebody in the community to come in and work with them. If they're struggling with their gender identity or other issues that's where I come in. (cis-female, heterosexual, American Indian [#0111])

Participants assessed the safety of the school for LGBTQ students primarily through the absence of having heard about "issues." Many surmised that the experiences of LGBTQ students were positive because they were not aware of any bullying related to sexual or gender minority identity. To this effect, one administrator explained, "They're treated well. I would say that we have not had any. In my 10 years here, I can count on one hand the incidences of students that have approached me about being bullied or bothered due to sexual orientation" (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0201]). A second administrator likewise assumed that bullying of LGBTQ students would be obvious:

> I just don't see it. If there were significant problems, and issues, and opinions, they would be very evident, or people would be [having] arguments and fights and altercations, and I have not had that happen. (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0202])

Participants seemed to believe in a threshold of problematic behavior, after which the school would be unsafe for LGBTQ students. It was often unclear how they identified this threshold, but most believed that their school was not past that threshold. Other participants speculated that LGBTQ students were doing well because "visible" LGBTQ students appeared integrated within the school community: "I don't think they're excluded, so I think they're pretty much accepted. They feel comfortable in this school. I've never heard otherwise" (school-health professional, cis-female, heterosexual, Hispanic [#0139]). An administrator said,

> For the most part [LGBTQ students are treated] pretty well. They socialize with other kids at lunch. They participate in various activities. We've got kiddos that participate in sports and band and choir and we don't limit their participation to anything. They're able to do whatever they choose to do. (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0208])

Such beliefs regarding the absence of overt, multi-level discrimination and exclusion appeared to undergird conceptualizations of schools as LGBTQ-friendly.

Assumptions that schools were already safe and supportive helped participants justify inaction in implementing LGBTQ-inclusive policies and procedures to reduce disparities in well-being. An administrator remarked,

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

> We haven't encountered anything so divisive :: : where we've had to lay down specific rules to serve those students outside of the general rules of we're going to treat each other kindly and respectfully and respect each other's right to be. We haven't had a series of crises related to the needs of LGBTQ students. (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0201])

Drawing upon the language of "crisis" to denote the threshold for justifying measures to adopt supportive policies and procedures, this principal invoked a second rhetorical strategy for rationalizing maintenance of the status quo: arguing that staff ideals of equality dictated treating students the same.

All Students Are Special; All Students Are Treated Equally and Fairly.—This strategy built upon a commitment to difference-blind ideology and convictions that LGBTQ students were the same as other students. As such, they did not have different needs and should not be treated differently than heterosexual and cisgender peers. This difference-blindness also extended to other sources of difference among students, not only between LGBTQ and other students, but also within-LGBTQ differences. Participants were asked to describe differences in how LGBTQ students of different sexual orientations and gender identities were treated at school. Further, they were asked to describe differences in the way that LGBTQ students were treated because of their racial/ethnic background. Consistently, participants responded with a difference-blind, or specifically color-blind frame. Echoing others, a school-health professional said,

> I don't see our students as separate. I would say you had your honkies, and your jocks. It's kind of like, what would athletes need to be supported at this school? I feel like everybody has basic needs, so it's hard for me to separate that. All students need to be heard, they need to be listened to, they need to feel safe in their environment. I feel like that would apply here, but it would apply to everybody. (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0235])

The same participant highlighted the extent to which schools expected students to ensure their needs were met with minimal institutional support:

> As a whole our district has pretty much just said, "All students are special. All students are treated equally and fairly." I see that kind of a common thread throughout our district that goes into the schools and I don't know that there's been any specific training. I think that the students identify those teachers that, and the people in the schools that they can talk to and go to, there's always those favorites and I think then that gets spread by word of mouth.

If participants acknowledged that LGBTQ students had different experiences at school than the majority of students, it was often to equate their experiences with other social outcasts. A second school-health professional said, "At this school they seem to support each other. They are lumped together. A lot of the kids, not just the LGBTQ issues but a lot of our more socially challenged kids tend to cling together" (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0108_1]).

Most participants (90%) expressed beliefs that all students had the same needs, that is, to be accepted and feel safe, few offered any concrete ideas of what might be necessary for the

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

school to do to ensure that LGBTQ youth felt this way. However, many had difficulty when pressed to elaborate on such ideas. A third school-health professional commented,

> I think the counselors, the social workers address the needs as specific. The staff otherwise are supportive regardless :: : I may address more of the emotional needs and specific needs of the student whereas the staff is more just accepting, which I think is a support in itself. (cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0106])

Here, the participant communicated the belief that generalized support, divorced from efforts to provide LGBTQ-centered support, was sufficient to positively affect student outcomes.

When invited to contemplate what might prevent them from giving support to LGBTQ students, a fourth school-health professional also drew upon a narrative strategy that elided differences among students and abdicated institutional responsibility,

> At the school level, I don't feel like there's anything that they're not trying to do for them and stuff like that, so it is more a matter of meeting all the needs of all the students. It's the numbers; when you look at school funding and stuff like that :: : I mean they're supporting and allowing them to have their group, but unfortunately there is no funding. If they want to do something specific, they're going to have to figure out how to fund it themselves, so I think funding is the biggest issue. (school-health professional, cis-female, heterosexual, Hispanic [#0105])

This quote exemplified the struggle of translating abstract ideas of equality, based on difference-blindness, into material supports for LGBTQ youth, especially in the context of resource scarcity.

Singled Out.—As part of a third narrative strategy, several participants alleged it was imperative not to make LGBTQ students feel different. A school-health professional remarked that their needs were "to feel that they belong, to feel accepted, that they're not singled out for anything specific, that they have a safe place to be" (cis-female, bisexual, white [#0103]). Participants demonstrated a pervasive belief that being treated differently would exacerbate LGBTQ stigma. As such, the best thing to do for LGBTQ students was to maintain a public discourse of sameness and avoid institutionalizing discussions of sexuality or gender identity.

Some participants worried that providing resources for LGBTQ students constituted discrimination against non-LGBTQ students if they did not also provide "special" services for heterosexual students. One administrator said,

> Because we don't see it as being a problem here as far as accepting [LGBTQ students], we don't go out of our way to do anything because if you're doing something special for one group, it means you're discriminating possibly against another group. If you look like you're doing something for someone then somebody else is going to sit there and think you're against that group of individuals. (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0203])

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

For those participants who viewed LGBTQ-specific policies as "special" treatment for LGBTQ youth, there was a sense that singling out youth as LGBTQ would harm all students by condoning "reverse discrimination."

Other participants also indicated the school's unwillingness to implement LGBTQ-inclusive policies and procedures, arguing that such efforts would make them targets of bullying and harassment. One school-health professional said,

> If the school opens up in saying this is going to be a safe place for LGB community I wonder if that would be good thing for the LGB students. Because they're feeling safe right now, but if we open up and say, "This is a safe place for you that you can come to," I question whether they would really come because maybe we might be singling them out, and so they might not feel safe coming. (cisgender male, heterosexual, American Indian [#0141])

A second participant provided a more explicit explanation,

> There's also a safe place that's been identified in the library, I don't think that there are LGBTQ identifiers. Frankly, I believe that in this community, there is a little bit of a resistance in a sense that if we identify that, it's going to become a target, and may inflame situations instead of making it better. (school-health professional, cis-female, heterosexual, white [#0112])

Case-By-Case Basis.—To reframe institutional inaction as a benefit to LGBTQ students, participants emphasized managing bullying and harassment on a "case-by-case" basis. Without an institutional response to LGBTQ student needs, staff reportedly acted if the issue or the student was visible enough to attract their attention. A school-health professional stated,

> What I was told is they don't see any of it as anything different, they address the situations as they come up, and they take them one step at a time. If that was when somebody needed to be able to not go to the men's restroom and they wanted to, they addressed that, they found a location. They found a way to deal with it. So, they handle them as they come, and they don't ignore them (cis-female, heterosexual, Hispanic [#0105])

This quotation exemplified another instance of setting a low bar for addressing LGBTQ student needs—not ignoring a transgender student's advocacy for restroom access meant these needs were being met. This participant also appealed to the rhetorical strategy of difference-blindness to support the assertion that dealing with such issues individually was the optimal way of supporting LGBTQ students. An administrator invoked this strategy similarly,

> It's kind of a case-by-case basis because we don't really have an issue. It's just been a non-issue, but if I had to deal with an issue I would be very comfortable dealing with the issue just like I would be comfortable dealing with any issue that we have here whether it's a discipline issue, an academic issue, an attendance issue, any issue that would come up I would have no problem dealing with. (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0215])

Author Manuscript

This response underscored the common belief that LGBTQ students do not experience school qualitatively differently as a result of their sexual or gender minority status.

Participants also linked their use of an individualized, versus institutional, approach to meeting LGBTQ student needs to their estimation of the size of a school's LGBTQ population, based on the aforementioned strategies. Another administrator explained,

> [T]he numbers are not large on this campus so we deal with more on a one-on-one type of issue of understanding what that person may be dealing with and finding solutions on how to deal with it, how to cope with that as opposed to doing a broad scope, "Here's what's going to happen." I don't have a lot of hours in the day to do a lot of that type of staff development or workshop for the kids. So, we deal with this more on an individual need basis as opposed to addressing it as a group basis. (cis-male, heterosexual, white [#0203])

While this participant emphasized time and resources as barriers to meeting LGBTQ student needs, they appeared convinced that striving to do so would not constitute an effective use of time and resources, given their assumption that the LGBTQ population is small or nonexistent.

Discussion

In this section, we describe how difference-blindness, rooted in tacit commitments to equality over equity, surfaced in interviews and contributed to institutional cultures that reify LGBTQ homogenization, invisibility, and marginalization. As mesolevel actors, participants used interconnected strategies to interpret cues of LGBTQ visibility, and determine what steps schools might take to be more inclusive of LGBTQ students. Use of these strategies mediated pressures from school and district policies, resource shortages, their own attitudes, and LGBTQ students' needs. Staff's enactment of these strategies may have served to, although unintentionally, marginalize LGBTQ students.

For some participants, interpretation of visibility cues led them to assume that schools had no LGBTQ students. This assumption hinged on reliance on a deficit model of sexual or gender minority identity, with some participants implying crisis as inevitable or inherent to LGBTQ identity. Participants who were aware of LGBTQ students recognized such youth through: self-advocacy; stereotypes; and relationships. Frequently, when students engaged in self-advocacy for their civil rights, participants characterized them as "in your face." Similarly, students perceived as performing LGBTQ stereotypes were characterized as attention-seeking, or as following trends. Participants also assessed LGBTQ visibility through observation of same-sex relationships, which influenced the sense that students' LGBTQ identities reflected efforts to follow a trend. This questioning of sexual identities based on such cues may contribute to institutional cultures hostile to LGBTQ students, and foster an unrealistic sense of the number and diversity of LGBTQ students. Not only are diverse sexual and gender identities erased by the reliance on visibility cues, other forms of difference (e.g., race/ethnicity) that were not explicitly brought to participants' attention were similarly ignored.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Crucially, such underestimates led participants to rely on narrative strategies that allowed them to avoid considering implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive policies or professional development. Participants asserted the following to explain such inaction: (a) the LGBTQ population was too small to warrant allocation of resources; (b) valuing equality entailed treating all students the same; (c) LGBTQ-inclusive policies would identify and further stigmatize LGBTQ youth; and (d) student issues were addressed through individualized intervention. Participants used these strategies interchangeably, and often simultaneously, to rhetorically support their belief that schools successfully accommodated the needs of their LGBTQ students. Buoyed by a sense that LGBTQ students were doing well and that students benefit from being treated the same, staff mediated between macrolevel pressures from the school/district and microlevel pressures from individual students in ways that caved to institutional inertia.

Perceptions of LGBTQ student visibility undergirded the first strategy. Believing in a miniscule LGBTQ population made the other strategies seem reasonable. The second strategy, treating all students the same in the name of equality, is reminiscent of ideological frameworks that support color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Although Bonilla-Silva (2010) posits multiple ideological frames for justifying the status quo, he describes one frame in particular, “abstract liberalism” that resonates in this context. According to Bonilla-Silva (2010), abstract liberalism captures how institutional actors use ideals of liberalism (e.g., equality, individualism) in amorphous ways that ignore certain groups’ differential positions in systems of power, while placing an inordinate level of agency on individuals to shape their own outcomes.

To refer to the ways that participants used abstract liberalism, we propose a formulation of difference-blindness: “LGBTQ blindness” (elsewhere called “queer blindfolding” [Smith & Shin, 2014]) to refer to participants’ tendency to erase students’ sexual and gender identities in the name of equality. The use of LGBTQ blindness, as well as other forms of difference-blindness, by participants represents an attempt to marshal evidence of their commitment to equality but obscures both the necessity of an equity perspective and the possibility that different students have different needs.

Participants implicitly placed the onus of responsibility on students to ensure satisfaction of their own needs. However, they were confident that LGBTQ students could seek out allies and support without institutional intervention. Some participants emphasized the extent to which “social outcasts,” including LGBTQ youth, looked out for each other. These beliefs illustrate the characteristics of abstract liberalism through their placement of ultimate responsibility for finding support for individual youths, absolving schools from provision of institutional support.

Instead, participants reported that schools adopted individualized plans for addressing LGBTQ student needs. This approach raises the prospect that most LGBTQ students never benefit from institutional support unless they are in crisis. At the point that crisis management constitutes the primary way that schools support LGBTQ youth, staff’s efforts to keep LGBTQ youth less visible—for fear of singling them out—are futile. If a crisis attracts attention, the student has already been “singled out.” Conversely, when staff support

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

depends on a crisis, everyday needs and supports, while just as important, may not be considered.

At its core, this narrative of students as “the same” obviates the need for equitable, rather than equal, treatment of students. One participant mentioned that academic expectations of students were applied evenly across all students. This logic ignored the possibility that LGBTQ and other marginalized students might be disadvantaged in fulfilling these expectations despite equal treatment. When a student is homeless because they have been disowned by their family or skips school because it feels unsafe, a counterargument can be made that more has to be done to help that student close the gap that separates their capacity to meet expectations with that of more privileged students (Mathison, 1998). Actors in institutions must prioritize equity and eschew the belief that an absence of discrimination is enough for LGBTQ students to thrive (Spalding et al., 2010).

These themes shed light on the development of institutional cultures. Crucially, these themes were prevalent across all schools in the sample, regardless of geographic region. This process is a result of mesolevel mediation on behalf of staff with microlevel implications for individual students. In the absence of supportive mesolevel actors to effectively mediate between macrolevel pressures and microlevel needs, LGBTQ youth are compelled to navigate dynamics of stigma and identity in ways that contribute to their marginalization or allow them contingent visibility to the detriment of relationships with staff.

Limitations

Our study has limitations. Data were derived from an RCT, and the interview protocol for collecting data focused on the implementation climates of schools, rather than our specific research questions. However, our aims and those of the parent study substantially overlapped. Also, our focus on a single state limits generalizability, but similar findings have been reported in past research in the United States and United Kingdom (Mayberry et al., 2013; Mishna et al., 2009). The RCT study design also necessitated focusing data collection exclusively in public schools. Although our analysis showed that even public schools were rarely actively engaged in promoting a welcoming school environment for LGBTQ youth, prior research indicates that private schools might be even less invested in this mission if the school is religiously affiliated (Mengler, 2018). In one quantitative study regarding the impact of school’s sponsorship of a GSA on illicit drug use, private schools were far less likely to sponsor a GSA compared to public schools in the sample (Heck et al., 2014). The 2019 GLSEN school climate survey found that LGBTQ students in religiously affiliated private schools were the most likely to report experiencing school policies and practices that discriminated against LGBTQ students. However, the authors of the climate survey report also found that private, nonreligious schools were more likely than public or charter schools to provide students with LGBTQ-related resources and supports. Still, LGBTQ students at public schools were the most likely to have access to a GSA and LGBTQ-inclusive school libraries (Kosciw et al., 2020). Future research should aim to disentangle differences between public and private high schools in promoting LGBTQ-affirming school environments.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

The data themselves were limited. Scholars argue that it is vitally important to investigate attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals at diverse intersections of sexuality and gender to fully understand the nature and origins of attitudes toward LGBTQ communities, writ large. However, many participants did not perceive (or articulate) differences among the multiple groups encapsulated under the nomenclature of LGBTQ. They often homogenized LGBTQ identities, or characterized expressions of being LGBTQ as "new" phenomena or something that still eluded their school. Many participants therefore defaulted to using aggregated terms or seeing one particular group as representative of all LGBTQ youth. The extent to which they perceived one aggregate group of LGBTQ youth shaped our ability to explore differences in how students were treated by staff or impacted by school policies.

Researchers call for future research investigating the intersection of sexual, racial/ethnic, and gender identities. Our participants were hard-pressed to describe how race, ethnicity, and other axes of difference intersect with the needs of their LGBTQ students, although several discussed the possibility that some students and staff identifying as Hispanic/Latinx might feel more prejudice toward LGBTQ individuals due to social norms around "machismo." In many schools involved in the study, racial/ethnic diversity within the school was very limited. As a majority–minority state, Hispanic/Latinx people constitute the majority of residents in many communities in New Mexico. As such, race/ethnicity does not rise to the forefront in discussions of LGBTQ students with those community members or in the broader community contexts in which their schools were located. Our team is currently exploring this topic, in addition to the influence of geographical differences across rural and urban locales, as part of our ongoing analyses. That said, despite repeated invitations by interviewers to reflect on the topic, no participants discussed the extent to which LGBTQ students of color might experience differential levels of privilege and discrimination based on race/ethnicity. Moreover, very few participants discussed their own positionality in those terms.

Implications

Future research that draws more explicit connections between interactional processes and LGBTQ youth behavioral health outcomes is key to developing interventions to promote their well-being. A broader perspective, linked to empirical research on health inequities, could illuminate the best ways for schools to enhance institutional capacity to support LGBTQ youth. However, our research begins the work of investigating how institutional cultures and climates form as a product of interactions between individuals' ideologies and entrenched bureaucracies. We have illuminated the possible effects of these interactions. We demonstrate that staff misperceptions are shaped by numerous ideological fallacies that undermine well-intentioned efforts to support LGBTQ students.

Future efforts by educational policymakers, school systems, and school staff to support LGBTQ students must engage in a wide-spread social justice project that aims to ensure equity for all students. Spalding et al. (2010) argue that educational systems can be more socially just through the use of theoretical frameworks and ideological commitments, clarity in school professional education, and an ethic of caring that recognizes the distinct positionalities of all students and staff. It is insufficient to dismantle discriminatory

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

structures, if not followed by the construction of "new intellectual and affective scaffolds that will enable teachers and teacher educators to be activists and advocates for social justice in their classrooms, their schools, and society" (194). To this end, educational systems bear the majority of the burden for ensuring that socially just and equitable practices are implemented to protect against the marginalization of LGBTQ students (Andrews et al., 2017).

Educational systems' approach to professional development would benefit from establishing clarity around what it means to strive for social justice in schools. Although many school professionals want to advance social justice and equity for their students, they receive very little training in their professional development about how that would look in practice (Spalding et al., 2010). We advocate for increasing access to training and professional development opportunities that provide concrete, role-specific examples for how to interact with students in socially just ways that work against the marginalization of students from all backgrounds. Professional development opportunities should further give school professionals tools for making sense of both the individual and structural causes of students' difficulties, academic or interpersonal (Spalding et al., 2010).

Professional development can be an important site for promoting equitable school environments to the extent that it allows participants to consider how students' and staff's lives and school experiences are mediated by systems of inequity (Andrews et al., 2017). However, school staff often face barriers to accessing the resources for professional development. School districts must allow staff, including administrators, counselors, and social workers as well as teachers, the time and resources to seek out and take part in this type of training. Participants in this study reported that access to resources from the district represented a major barrier to receiving professional development on equitable school environments for marginalized youth.

School professionals' status as mesolevel actors positions them as mediators between macrolevel resource allocation processes and microlevel student needs. For participants in this study, LGBTQ blindness emerges as a way for them to resolve the dissonance rooted in the contradiction between their ideals for best serving their students and their biases, in the context of an educational system that does not prioritize or allow space for professional development. Participants consistently reported the desire to meet the needs of LGBTQ students and support their mental health, but in the absence of professional development around the specialized needs of marginalized students, did not have concrete examples of how to do so. In an era of viral pandemic, when school buildings are closed to protect public safety, the salience of schools as protective environments for LGBTQ youth behavioral health is particularly stark. For many LGBTQ students, schools can be safer than their own homes. The mutual recognition of both school staff and students about the capacity of schools to provide a source of empowerment and path to equity demonstrates the profound importance of equipping school staff with the resources and tools that they require to more fully address the needs of marginalized students. We call for the allocation of funding to school districts that would provide the necessary time and financial resources to school staff for role-specific and contextually relevant professional development on meeting the unique needs of all of their students.

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

References

Andrews DJC, Richmond G, & Stroupe D (2017). Teacher education and teaching in the present political landscape: Promoting educational equity through critical inquiry and research. Journal of Teacher Education, 68(2), 121–124. 10.1177/0022487117691243

Banks JA (1995). Equity pedagogy: An essential component of multicultural education. Theory Into Practice, 34(3), 152–158. 10.1080/00405849509543674

Bonilla-Silva E (2010). Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and racial inequality in contemporary America (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Bradley E, Albright G, McMillan J, & Shockley K (2019). Impact of a simulation on educator support of LGBTQ youth. Journal of LGBT Youth, 16(3), 317–339. 10.1080/19361653.2019.1578324

Brownell MT, Bishop AM, & Sindelar PT (2018). Republication of "NCLB and the demand for highly qualified teachers: Challenges and solutions for rural schools." Rural Special Education Quarterly, 37(1), 4–11. 10.1177/8756870517749604

Bry LJ, Mustanski B, Garofalo R, & Burns MN (2018). Resilience to discrimination and rejection among young sexual minority males and transgender females: A qualitative study on coping with minority stress. Journal of Homosexuality, 65(11), 1435–1456. 10.1080/00918369.2017.1375367 [PubMed: 28901829]

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender health: LGBT youth https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth.htm#schools-can-do

Charmaz K (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis Sage Publications.

Ciszek E (2017). Public relations, activism and identity: A cultural-economic examination of contemporary LGBT activism. Public Relations Review, 43(4), 809–816. 10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.01.005

Davis TS, Saltzburg S, & Locke CR (2010). Assessing community needs of sexual minority youths: Modeling concept mapping for service planning. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services: The Quarterly Journal of Community & Clinical Practice, 22(3), 226–249. 10.1080/10538720903426354

DeTurk S (2018). All students are special (though some are more special than others). In Atay A & Trebing D (Eds.), The discourse of special populations: Critical intercultural communication, pedagogy, and practice (pp. 11–22). Routledge.

Gkiouleka A, Huijts T, Beckfield J, & Bambra C (2018). Understanding the micro and macro politics of health: Inequalities, intersectionality & institutions—A research agenda. Social Science & Medicine, 200(January), 92–98. 10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.01.025 [PubMed: 29421476]

Glaser BG, & Strauss AL (2017). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research Routledge.

Green AE, Willging CE, Ramos MM, Shattuck D, & Gunderson L (2018). Factors impacting implementation of evidence-based strategies to create safe and supportive schools for sexual and gender minority students. Journal of Adolescent Health, 63(5), 643–648. 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.06.004

Heck NC, Flentje A, & Cochran BN (2011). Offsetting risks: High school gay-straight alliances and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) youth. School Psychology Quarterly, 26(2), 161–174. 10.1037/a0023226

Heck NC, Livingston NA, Flentje A, Oost K, Stewart BT, & Cochran BN (2014). Reducing risk for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse: High school gay-straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Addictive Behaviors, 39(4), 824–828. 10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.01.007 [PubMed: 24531638]

Jephcote M, & Davies B (2004). Recontextualizing discourse: An exploration of the workings of the meso level. Journal of Education Policy, 19(5), 547–564. 10.1080/0268093042000269135

Kann L, Olsen EO, McManus T, Harris WA, Shanklin SL, Flint KH, Queen B, Lowry R, Chyen D, Whittle L, Thornton J, Lim C, Yamakawa Y, Brener N, & Zaza S (2016). Sexual identity, sex of sexual contacts, and health-related behaviors among students in grades 9– 12—United States and selected sites, 2015. MMWR. Surveillance Summaries, 65(9), 1–202. 10.15585/mmwr.ss6509a1

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Kimmel AP (2016). Title IX: An imperfect but vital tool to stop bullying of LGBT students. The Yale Law Journal, 125(7), 2006–2036.

Kosciw JG, Clark CM, Truong NL, & Zongrone AD (2020). The 2019 National school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

Kosciw JG, Greytak EA, & Diaz EM (2009). Who, what, where, when, and why: Demographic and ecological factors contributing to hostile school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 38, 976–988. 10.1007/s10964-009-9412-1 [PubMed: 19636740]

Kosciw JG, Greytak EA, Zongrone AD, Clark CM, & Truong NL (2018). The 2017 National school climate survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

Kosciw JG, Palmer NA, Kull RM, & Greytak EA (2013). The effect of negative school climate on academic outcomes for LGBT youth and the role of in-school supports. Journal of School Violence, 12(1), 45–63. 10.1080/15388220.2012.732546

Kull RM, Greytak EA, & Kosciw JG (2019). Supporting safe and healthy schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students: A national survey of school counselors, social workers, and psychologists Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=4ddeba34-3b97-4987-9e5f-b25fadc0861a%40pdc-v-sessmgr05&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3D%3D#AN=ED592548&db=eric

MacKay J, Robinson M, Pinder S, & Ross LE (2017). A grounded theory of bisexual individuals' experiences of help seeking. The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 87(1), 52–61. 10.1037/ort0000184 [PubMed: 27148752]

Mathison C (1998). The invisible minority: Preparing teachers to meet the needs of gay and lesbian youth. Journal of Teacher Education, 49(2), 151–155. 10.1177/0022487198049002008

Mayberry M, Chenneville T, & Currie S (2013). Challenging the sounds of silence: A qualitative study of gay-straight alliances and school reform efforts. Education and Urban Society, 45(3), 307–339. 10.1177/0013124511409400

Mengler A (2018). Public dollars, private discrimination: Protecting LGBT students from school voucher discrimination. Fordham Law Review, 87(3), 1251–1292. https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol87/iss3/15

Mishna F, Newman PA, Daley A, & Solomon S (2009). Bullying of lesbian and gay youth: A qualitative investigation. British Journal of Social Work, 39(8), 1598–1614. 10.1093/bjsw/bcm148

Mustanski B, Newcomb M, & Garofalo R (2011). Mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: A developmental resiliency perspective. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services: The Quarterly Journal of Community & Clinical Practice, 23(2), 204–225. 10.1080/10538720.2011.561474

Nieto S (2000). Placing equity front and center some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. Journal of Teacher Education, 51(3), 180–187. 10.1177/0022487100051003004

Paceley MS (2016). Gender and sexual minority youth in nonmetropolitan communities: Individual- and community-level needs for support. Families in Society, 97(2), 77–85. 10.1606/1044-3894.2016.97.11

Patton MQ (2015). Qualitative research and evaluation methods (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Pennell SM (2017). Training secondary teachers to support LGBTQ+ Students: Practical applications from theory and research. The High School Journal, 101(1), 62–72. 10.1353/hsj.2017.0016

Poteat VP, Sinclair KO, Digiovanni CD, Koenig BW, & Russell ST (2013). Gay-straight alliances are associated with student health: A multischool comparison of LGBTQ and heterosexual youth. Journal of Research on Adolescence, 23(2), 319–330. 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00832.x

Powers B, & Duffy PB (2016). Making invisible intersectionality visible through theater of the oppressed in teacher education. Journal of Teacher Education, 67(1), 61–73. 10.1177/0022487115607621

Rands KE (2009). Considering transgender people in education: A gender-complex approach. Journal of Teacher Education, 60(4), 419–431. 10.1177/0022487109341475

Richter M, & Dragano N (2018). Micro, macro, but what about meso? The institutional context of health inequalities. International Journal of Public Health, 63(2), 163–164. 10.1007/s00038-017-1064-4 [PubMed: 29250722]

Saperstein A, Penner AM, & Light R (2013). Racial formation in perspective: Connecting individuals, institutions, and power relations. Annual Review of Sociology, 39(1), 359–378. 10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145639

Shattuck D, Hall JL, Green A, Greenberg C, Penaloza L, Ramos M, & Willging C (2020). Recruitment of schools for intervention research to reduce health disparities for sexual and gender minority students. The Journal of School Nursing: The Official Publication of the National Association of School Nurses, 36(4), 258–264. 10.1177/1059840518820103 [PubMed: 30587088]

Smith LC, & Shin RQ (2014). Queer blindfolding: A case study on difference "blindness" toward persons who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Journal of Homosexuality, 61(7), 940–961. 10.1080/00918369.2014.870846 [PubMed: 24325178]

Spalding E, Klecka CL, Lin E, Odell SJ, & Wang J (2010). Social justice and teacher education: A hammer, a bell, and a song. Journal of Teacher Education, 61(3), 191–196. 10.1177/0022487109359762

Swanson K, & Gettinger M (2016). Teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and supportive behaviors toward LGBT students: Relationship to gay-straight alliances, antibullying policy, and teacher training. Journal of LGBT Youth, 13(4), 326–351. 10.1080/19361653.2016.1185765

Taylor C (1994). The politics of recognition. In Gutmann A (Ed.), Multiculturalism (pp. 25–74). Princeton University Press.

Ueno K (2005). Sexual orientation and psychological distress in adolescence: Examining interpersonal stressors and social support processes. Social Psychology Quarterly, 68(3), 258–277. 10.1177/019027250506800305

Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript Author Manuscript

Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript
Author Manuscript

Public Policy Relevance Statement

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth who experience hostile and anti-LGBTQ school climates exhibit more severe behavioral health difficulties compared to those LGBTQ youth who go to schools with more inclusive environments. This study examines how school climates that do not affirm LGBTQ students are constituted at the mesolevel and proposes changes to school policies around school professional education to promote LGBTQ-inclusive schools.